

James Buchanan



Matthew Brady photo of Buchanan, 1858. Library of Congress

In 1856 when James Buchanan was elected America's fifteenth president he became the first, and so far the only, Pennsylvanian to serve in that office. His long and diverse political career included service in Pennsylvania's General Assembly, United States congressman, United States senator, minister to Russia, secretary of state under President James K. Polk, and ambassador to Great Britain. Buchanan entered the White House at a moment when long-simmering sectional discontent over the issue of slavery threatened to sunder the young Republic in two. Historians continue to debate the precise nature of Buchanan's role in failing to prevent the outbreak of the Civil War. At the time, however, a majority of the American people welcomed his election because they believed that only his kind of deft conciliation and compromise could preserve the Union.

Born April 21, 1791 in a log cabin at a frontier outpost called Stony Batter in Cove Gap, Franklin County, James Buchanan was the eldest of eleven children. His father, James Buchanan Sr., an Irish immigrant who operated the trading post, was a demanding parent who offered his children little praise. James Buchanan's more indulgent mother, Elizabeth Speer Buchanan of Lancaster, was a self-educated and religious woman. In 1796 his father moved the family to Mercersburg where they lived above the family store. Young James assisted his father in the store, where he mastered the kind of meticulous bookkeeping his father demanded. His formal education began at the Old Stone Academy in Mercersburg where he studied Greek and Latin.

At age sixteen, Buchanan was admitted to Dickinson College in Carlisle where he proved a conscientious and popular student. He was, however, given to disruptive antics, and expelled from the school. Fortunately, an influential family friend intervened on his behalf and Buchanan was readmitted, graduating with distinction in 1809.

At the urging of his father, Buchanan traveled to Lancaster to study law with James Hopkins and was admitted to the bar in 1812. After practicing law for two years, he was nominated as a Federalist candidate for the Pennsylvania Assembly on August 24, 1814, the same day that British forces burned the city of Washington, D.C. during the War of 1812. Although at first opposed to the war, he served several weeks in a volunteer cavalry unit during the siege of Baltimore. He was subsequently elected to two terms in the Pennsylvania Assembly.

Although Buchanan was over six feet tall and distinguished looking, he seldom gave campaign speeches, preferring to exert his political influence through writing personal letters. His letters reflect the disciplined logic of a lawyer. He also was very much at home at social gatherings. An upright shirt collar reaching to his chin was his trademark, and a congen-

ital eye deformity caused him to tilt one side of his head forward, creating an impression of giving his fullest attention to those with whom he conversed. He was renowned for a sense of humor that seldom showed itself in his public statements.

He quickly established his reputation as a competent and thorough lawyer, known for developing sound legal strategies. Never regarded as a brilliant speaker, he won his cases by conducting exhaustive background research and presenting judges and juries with sound arguments grounded upon solid facts. Neither a brilliant nor visionary thinker, Buchanan's long political career was distinguished by this kind of minute attention to detail, strict legal logic, and hard work.

Buchanan never married and many historians have attributed this to his tragic early relationship with Ann Caroline Coleman, daughter of Pennsylvania's wealthiest ironmaster Robert Coleman. When James and Ann became engaged in 1819, Ann's possessive father opposed the union. And when Ann learned that, upon his return from Philadelphia on business one afternoon, Buchanan had paid a visit at the home of another young woman rather than coming first to see her, she abruptly broke off the engagement. Shortly thereafter, Ann traveled to Philadelphia to avoid seeing Buchanan. While in the city, she fell ill and died under circumstances that hinted of a possible suicide. Buchanan was devastated by her death, and by Robert Coleman's refusal to allow him to attend her funeral. Buchanan never again came close to marrying and instead immersed himself in his law books and his political career. When he was elected president his niece, Harriet Lane, served as official White House hostess.

First elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1820, he served four terms representing Lancaster, Lebanon, and Dauphin Counties. Although long a Federalist, Buchanan supported Democrat Andrew Jackson as early as 1824. In 1828, with the decline of the Federalist Party, he declared himself a Democrat. Though Buchanan supported President

Andrew Jackson, Jackson distrusted Buchanan after a misunderstanding that arose during the 1824 presidential election. In 1831 Jackson appointed Buchanan United States minister to Russia to prevent him from running for vice president. During his fourteen months in St. Petersburg, Buchanan negotiated the first U.S. trade agreement with Russia.

Upon his return to the United States, Buchanan won election to the United States Senate in 1834 where he served until 1845. As a senator, he promoted the notion that governmental power ought to be held in check by a strict interpretation of the federal Constitution and counseled restraint with regard to the contentious issue of slavery. He believed that war could only be avoided if both sections agreed to mediation and made concessions. Though Buchanan was personally opposed to slavery, he also believed



Harriet Lane, Buchanan's niece, served as First Lady during his presidency. Painting by G. C. Munzig, c.1899. Smithsonian Institution

that the institution of slavery was protected by the federal Constitution. He was disturbed by what he saw as the irresponsible agitation of abolitionists that served only to stir up anger and distrust in the southern states. Like Thomas

Jefferson, he believed that left undisturbed and given enough time the institution of slavery would eventually wither away.

Although considered a strong candidate for his party's nomination for the presidency in 1844, 1848, and 1852, he lost each time. In 1844, James K. Polk appointed Buchanan secretary of state, but the two men frequently disagreed over policy. Oregon was acquired from Great Britain by treaty and military victories in the Mexican War resulted in the purchase of as much territory from Mexico as Congress was willing to fund. Buchanan wanted to go even further by acquiring Cuba, the Hawaiian Islands, and Central America. The notion of acquiring Cuba and Central America was particularly favored by southern slave owners hoping to expand the slave-owning territory of the United States and thereby strengthen their position in Congress. Any annexation of such southern territories was opposed by northern abolitionists and free soil advocates, however, who feared such acquisitions precisely because they would increase the voting strength of southern slave owners.

When Whig Party candidate Zachary Taylor won the presidency in 1848, Buchanan retired to Lancaster where he purchased the beautiful country estate called Wheatland. For many years, Buchanan played the role of elder statesman to his party while counseling, comforting, and supporting his less fortunate relatives. He found retirement to his liking, entertaining a constant stream of family and friends. During those years, he reared two nephews and his niece, Harriet Lane, at Wheatland.

Buchanan always considered his retirement to be temporary and continued to have an active interest in the presidency. Political discussions often centered on his



Wheatland, James Buchanan's estate in Lancaster. Photo by Kurt Zwiak

opposition to the Compromise of 1850. This compromise laid the groundwork for the idea that settlers in new territories could decide whether to allow slavery. This was known as "popular sovereignty." Buchanan, like many southerners, had favored extending the 1820

Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific. States located north of the line would continue to exclude slavery while states south of the line would allow slavery, thereby maintaining a congressional balance of power between the territories. In 1849, however, California applied for admission as a free state. Under the Compromise of 1850, the south reluctantly accepted the admission of California as a free state in exchange for passage of a new fugitive slave law designed to test the good faith of the north. Though many leading Whigs and Democrats believed this compromise was the only way to quiet the agitation over slavery, Buchanan correctly feared that the Compromise of 1850 could only lead to further confrontation and ultimate disaster.

Though Buchanan was put forward as the 1852 Democratic presidential candidate by Pennsylvania's delegation, the convention instead selected Franklin Pierce as the Democratic nominee. Hoping to isolate Buchanan from domestic affairs—and any chance of obtaining the 1856 nomination for the presidency—President Pierce appointed Buchanan minister to Great Britain in 1853. While in England, Buchanan was instrumental in crafting the Ostend Manifesto, an unofficial notification that the United States meant to acquire Cuba even if Spain would not sell it. A naval war with Great Britain over Central America was averted only when British public opinion reacted negatively to the horrors of the Crimean War. Frustrated at his inability to effect change in Britain's foreign policy toward the United States, Buchanan asked to go home in 1855.

In 1856 Buchanan, at the age of 65, at last enjoyed the solid support of the Democratic Party for the presidency.

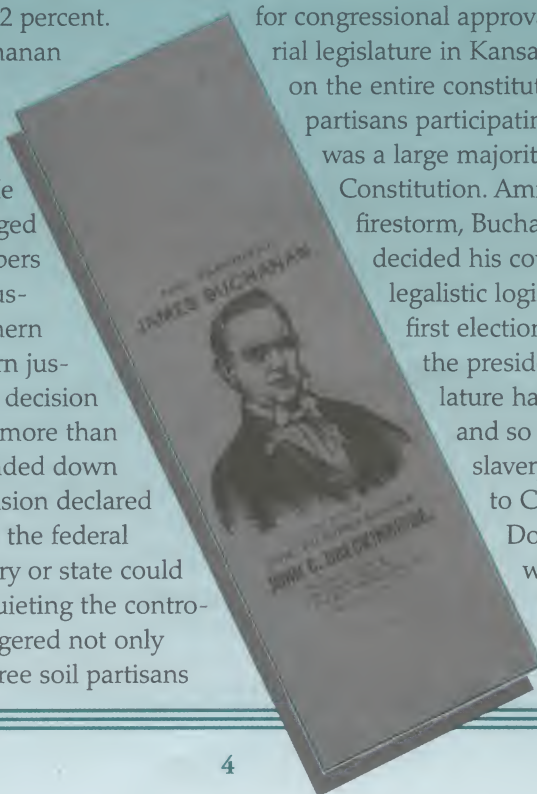
During his stay in England, all of the other potential candidates had seen their reputations tarnished by their involvement with the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the beginning of violent confrontations between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers in the Kansas territory. Buchanan believed that both secession and federal interference with slavery in states where it already existed were unconstitutional. He seemed the perfect compromise candidate for the majority of voters who wanted desperately to preserve the Union. In the general election he faced John C. Fremont, the first national candidate of the new Republican Party which drew support from northern free soil partisans and abolitionists. Some southern extremists threatened immediate secession if Fremont were elected. Buchanan carried all of the slave states except Maryland, as well as Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, New Jersey, and California. Though he had a clear majority in the Electoral College, he received only 45 percent of the popular vote in a three-way contest where Fremont got 33 percent and Whig/Know Nothing candidate Millard Fillmore got 22 percent.

In his inaugural address, Buchanan said that the Supreme Court would soon decide slavery's status in the territories and lay that contentious issue to rest. He knew this because he had engaged in secret discussions with members of the Court. During these discussions, he urged one of the northern justices to vote with the southern justices in the Dred Scott case in a decision that would be written to clarify more than the status of just one slave. Handed down two days later, the majority decision declared that slaves were property under the federal Constitution and that no territory or state could alter their status. Rather than quieting the controversy, however, this decision angered not only abolitionists but also northern free soil partisans

who saw slave labor as a threat to the economic potential of free labor in the emerging western states.

Failing to appreciate the growing power of free soil ideology in the north, Buchanan continued his longstanding policy of appeasing the slave states by appointing many southerners to his cabinet. He also showed his southern leaning in the matter of "Bleeding Kansas." The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise line of 1820 and destroyed the finality of the Compromise of 1850 by allowing voters in the western territories to decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery. Large numbers of pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers rushed into the Kansas territory. When voters met at Lecompton to write a state constitution, free soil Kansans boycotted the registration and election process, resulting in the election of a pro-slavery convention. When only a pro-slavery constitution was presented to voters, the anti-slavery faction again refused to participate and the pro-slavery constitution was sent to Buchanan for congressional approval. Meanwhile, the territorial legislature in Kansas called for a referendum on the entire constitution and, with anti-slavery partisans participating this time, the result was a large majority against the Lecompton Constitution. Amidst the ensuing national firestorm, Buchanan characteristically decided his course by applying a narrow legalistic logic to the case. Since the first election had been legal, neither the president nor a territorial legislature had authority to intervene and so he submitted the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution to Congress. Stephen A.

Douglas immediately broke with Buchanan, fracturing the Democratic Party into pro-Lecompton and anti-Lecompton fac-





tions. Meanwhile, Buchanan's expansionist foreign policy that sought to acquire Cuba and to move further into the Pacific Northwest and Central America alarmed many northern voters.

In 1859 Buchanan announced he would not run for reelection. In the ensuing contest, the Democrats remained split and Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected in a four-way race in which he carried not a single southern state and less than 40 percent of the popular vote. South Carolina immediately seceded from the Union and was quickly followed by seven other southern states. During the last three months of his term, Buchanan refused to recognize the right of any state to secede from the Union but also vowed he would commit no act of aggression toward the seceded states. He refused to give in to demands by South Carolina to surrender Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens but when he attempted to send reinforcements to Fort Sumter they were turned back by Confederate artillery. He hoped that a constitutional convention might be called to draft amendments to the federal Constitution that would settle the slavery issue. He believed as president, however, he did not possess the power to call such a convention without the support of Congress. A proposal in the Senate called the Crittenden Compromise would have restored the Missouri Compromise line but secessionists nixed the deal. When southern appointees resigned from his cabinet, he replaced them with northern

Unionists. Informal agreements between Buchanan and South Carolina prevented the outbreak of war until after Abraham Lincoln had moved into the White House.

Following his inauguration on March 4, 1861, Lincoln at first followed many of the same strategies pursued by James Buchanan. Lincoln had already pledged during the campaign not to interfere with the institution of slavery in those states where it already existed and resolved that if war were to come, the South would have to fire the first shot. When South Carolina did fire that shot at Fort Sumter in April 1861, Buchanan backed Lincoln's policies. Though Buchanan admired Lincoln's sincerity, supported the war effort with monetary contributions, and encouraged enlistment, he also believed Lincoln sometimes overstepped his constitutional powers. In 1866 Buchanan published a full defense of his policies as president. Though he believed that in time the wisdom of his actions would be appreciated, most historians today agree that his inability to grasp the importance of the emerging free soil ideology, his narrow legalistic reasoning, and a lack of visionary thinking hastened rather than retarded the final rift. None the less, on June 1, 1868, nearly twenty thousand people attended his funeral.

It is one of the ironies of history that, although James Buchanan entered the White House with a more impressive set of qualifications than any of his predecessors, historians have consistently given him poor marks for his performance in office. He was the

last of a long series of presidents who hoped for an eventual peaceful end to slavery in an undetermined future. With the benefit of knowing how things turned out, it is easy to focus on Buchanan's blunders such as his meddling in the Dred Scott Case, his ill-considered backing of the Lecompton Constitution, and his persistent efforts to appease southern secessionists while ignoring the rising tide of northern free soil ideology.

Buchanan's mistakes alone did not cause the Civil War. Those causes may be traced through a long chain of events stretching all the way back to the 3/5s compromise of 1788 that enshrined slavery in the United States Constitution. His inability, however, to rise above narrow legalistic thinking undoubtedly worsened the impending crisis. As in 1856, radicals in South Carolina threatened to secede should a Republican be elected in 1860. Had Buchanan succeeded in placing another Democrat in the White House in 1860, a secession crisis might have been forestalled for a generation. It was Buchanan's misfortune to occupy the White House at the moment when the long simmering forces tending toward disintegration of the Union were proving irrec-
oncilable. The Civil War would reach its high water mark in Pennsylvania in 1863. During the Gettysburg campaign, Confederate forces approached within ten

miles of Wheatland in a failed attempt to capture a bridge across the Susquehanna River. As the blood of two great armies was spilled on the soil of Pennsylvania that fateful summer, it was the bold vision of Abraham Lincoln rather than James Buchanan's policies of conciliation that would eventually bind the Union together and extinguish the institution of slavery.

Text by Timothy Buchanan, Willis Shirk, and Louis Waddell

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